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ABSTRACT

In an effort to comply with bilingual instruction requirements, school districts throughout California will soon be involved in testing vast numbers of children to determine language proficiency and language dominance. Many language tests will require a child to repeat a sentence or a phrase in exactly the same manner that is stated by an examiner or on a tape. Examiners with some experience in administering these tests will recognize a tendency of many children to repeat sentences in a manner that is similar but not exactly the same as the original statement, yet in a manner that does not actually alter the meaning of the entire statement. The variations tend to fall into two major categories: changes in syntax and changes in vocabulary. Many of the changes in syntax can be attributed to an ethnic dialect or even a child dialect, such as "The boys was busy," for "The boys were busy." A sample vocabulary change is the substitution of "dad" for "father." The adult's purpose in the testing activity may be to determine the child's ability to produce the correct sounds of a given language, but the child may not be interested in the adults' purposes. The child may be reconstructing reality or meaning as Piaget suggests children do. Test administrators should listen intelligently to these changes and give full credit in all cases where no changes in meaning have resulted. (MKM)

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING: LET'S LISTEN TO WHAT THE KIDS SAY!

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In an effort to comply with bilingual instruction requirements, school districts throughout California will soon be involved in testing vast numbers of children to determine language proficiency and language dominancy. Indeed, many districts have already been engaged in this task for some time. In the interest of complete fairness to children, it would be wise to listen to the content of their utterences with keen attention.

Many language tests will require a child to repeat a sentence or a phrase in exactly the same manner that it is stated by an examiner or a tape. Examiners with some experience in administering these tests will recognize the following tendency: many children will repeat a sentence in a manner that is similar, but not exactly the same as the original statement. The children will insert a slight variation in their replay which will, however, not actually alter the meaning of the entire statement.

The variations tend to fall into two major categories: changes in syntax and changes in vocabulary. The syntax changes may be illustrated by the following examples. A sen-

tence like, "The boys are buying new shoes," will frequently be changed to, "The boys is buying new shoes." The sentence, "The boys were busy," will almost invariably be changed to, "The boys was busy."

These syntax changes may, of course, be ascribed to dialect speech or dialect spill-over from one ethnic group to another. It may even be safe to consider the usage, "The boys was busy," as simply child dialect. Very few children, regardless of ethnic group, appear to feel really comfortable with the form were.

Another syntax change which appears to be typical of child speech or child dialect is the substitution of could for can. In a recent series of tests, the sentence, "The snail can spin," was replaced by children, in most instances, with "The snail could spin." This change of can to could may be a reflection of the young American child's tendency to use could to express specifically the concept of "is able to," as in, "She could ride a two-wheeler bike." The form can is generally used by young children to express only the concept of "have permission to," as in, "Can I go to the store?"

But whatever the reasons for these changes in syntax, they plainly do not alter the meaning of the statements. "The boys was busy," means exactly the same as, "The boys were busy." And "The snail could spin," within the confines of child dialect, means the same as "The snail can spin."

For that reason, such changes should not be counted as mistakes in language proficiency tests. A thinking child is never a passive listener. An intelligent and alert child will absorb the meaning as well as the sound of a statement and will very frequently repeat the sentence in a manner that sounds more acceptable to the child.

Even more beguiling are the changes in vocabulary. In the above mentioned series of tests, the sentence, "My father is further," was changed by a young speaker to, "My dad is further." Obviously, the child knew the meaning of the word father, felt less than comfortable with that form, and chose to use the word dad which was more within the range of the child's own speaking vocabulary. That the child's thought processes were logical, though subconscious goes without saying.

A different sentence, "I always tie my shoes before I go to school," was changed by a six year old to, "I all the time tie my shoes before I go to school." Here again, the child understood the full meaning of the sentence, found the word always uncomfortable, and substituted the string all the time.

Both of the sentences, "My father is further," and "I always tie my shoes before I go to school," were altered in a manner which preserved the original meaning. These changes are not errors and should not be counted as such. The adult purpose of using sentences of this type is to de-

termine the child's ability to produce the correct sounds of a given language. But the child is not interested in adult purposes.

Piaget stresses that, in learning anything, a child never copies reality. Instead, the child, through his own mental processes, reconstructs his own reality. Therefore, when a child processes the word father into dad, and the word always into all the time we, the school people, should listen intelligently to these changes and give full credit in all cases where no changes in meaning have resulted.

That much discussed sentence, "My father is further," an admittedly awkward and peculiar utterance, was changed by other children in different ways. The variations were as follows:

My father is bigger.

My father is brother.

My father is happy.

My father is thirty.

My father is Freddy.

Obviously, in these repetitions the children altered the meanings of the statements. But the great variety of changes of the sentence, "My father is further," clearly illustrates the young speakers' absolute demand for meaning. "My father is further," must have appeared totally nonsensical and therefore unacceptable to the children. To rescue

the sentence from a status of gobbledygook, the youngsters, without a pause, substituted the clear and understandable, "My father is bigger," "My father is thirty," and so on. The multiplicity and imagination behind these substitutions in vocabulary function as proof of the young child's utter rejection of meaningless statements. Though we may not be able to give full credit for the substitutions (since the meanings were changed), such instant restructuring of language should cause us all to become increasingly respectful of the truly impressive mental gymnastics of a five or six year old.

Another sentence which was plainly changed with an effort to secure greater meaning was, "He hugged the bug." The child repeated, "He heard the bug." Sentence number two obviously makes more sense. We do not hug bugs. Bugs are too small for people to hug. And bugs are generally not considered sufficiently appealing to be hugged, even if their sizes did not prevent such acts of affection.

Many of the children, upon hearing the sentence, "He hugged the bug," displayed expressions of puzzlement and disbelief. Some responded, "He what?" However, that six year old mind which produced the alternate, "He heard the bug," blithely proceeded to make sense out of nonsense and to substitute order for confusion.

Perceptive teachers of reading have long recognized the importance of meaning in reading material. The more

meaningful the reading material, the more readable it becomes. That same principle must be applied to the testing for language proficiency. Requiring children to repeat meaningless or nearly meaningless phrases for the purpose of recording pronounciations is a counterproductive activity. With a bit of attention to meanings and an emphasis on the way children speak, more effective materials may easily be developed which fulfill the dual purpose of testing for phonetic discrimination and, at the same time, making perfect sense to the ears and minds of young children.

Whether or not we should allow full credit for the repetition of any sentence must depend on the examiner's intelligent consideration of: "Was the meaning changed?" In all cases, when testing children for language proficiency and language dominancy, we should develop an awareness of the unique mental processes of the child. If we fail to do so, we may, unwittingly, be doing children a great disservice. In evaluating such tests, a narrow application of the exact repetition rule will not suffice.

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